Down The Rabbit Hole by beeupsidedown (bookofreid)

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Summary:

The Hargrove/Mayfield children aren't the only California natives new to Hawkins. Love and friendship bloom despite being thrown into a town that doesn't know how to be normal even if it tried.

1. Follow The White Rabbit

Chelsea Steely had always been a fun girl. She'd often take hikes up the west coast mountains or sunbathe on the sandy beaches. She'd attend fairs every year like clockwork and had a group of friends who were always more than willing to accompany her on joy rides. She was young and free with an adventurous heart, and yet somehow she ended up in Hawkins, the place where time seemed to literally stand still.

"Are you sure you don't want a ride?" Chelsea asked as she ran her hand through her wavy brown hair yet again. The spring day was oddly humid with warm winds and the sun showing itself for the first time that week. She wiped at the light sheen of sweat that sat on her forehead and sighed. She was bored, something she found was not uncommon when you'd been forced to move to a town in the middle of Indiana. The only interaction she'd had in the past few days since arriving had been with her cousin's friends, a group of kids who seemed to get into more trouble than even she could handle.

"No, I'm good," Dustin replied. "My friends will just stare at you again. You're too pretty."

She chuckled at his reference to the previous days where the younger boys seemed to focus on her every move as if she was a new creature to them. She couldn't even grab something from the kitchen without one of them watching intently.

"You think I'm pretty," she awed, her hand touching her heart. Every year Dustin would spend a week with her family out in California so she was more than fond of her little family member. He wouldn't ever admit it out loud but he thought she was pretty cool as well.

"Ew no, gross. You're my cousin!" He quickly corrected. "But you're a girl."

"Max and Jane are girls," Chelsea pointed out. She'd met the two girls and she was convinced they were the coolest of the bunch. She especially liked the redhead as she seemed adamant to be nonconforming to the typical gender stereotypes. She saw herself in

her and the younger girl seemed elated to have someone older she could talk to.

“Yeah but you’re a *real* girl.”

“That makes absolutely no sense.”

“Come on Chels, why don’t you just hang out with Steve? I know you’re bored,” Dustin replied as he scoured the sofas for spare change. She sighed deeply, not liking the idea of being left home alone.

“I’ve seen enough of Steve this past week,” she commented. She’d met Steve considering he was always around. She’d been surprised to wake up and find a strange boy in the kitchen making breakfast but he was charming with his jokes and fluffy hair. She found that she actually enjoyed his company but today just wasn’t the day for it. Steve was great and all, and it was nice to have someone her age to talk to, but she wanted to meet more people. She’d be starting school soon and the thought of only knowing one person was intimidating.

“Alright, come on. I’m taking you.” She waved away Dustin’s protests as she slipped on her shoes and grabbed her keys. “Don’t worry. I won’t go inside the arcade. I’ll just hang out outside. Maybe catch some sun.” “We don’t get sun here like you did in California,” he replied as he followed her out the door. “I’ve noticed,” she looked at her legs, noticing the way her tan had faded in just a week.

“An hour. That’s it,” Billy said as he looked at Max. She rolled her eyes but nodded in agreement, knowing better than to fight when he had that tone of voice.

“Fine. I won’t be late.”

“You better not. You don’t even have a skateboard to skate home on.”

She frowned at the reminder of her broken skateboard. No amount of tape she added was enough to mend it and her mother refused to buy her a new one, insisting she should act more like a girl.

“See ya,” she said as she hopped out of the car. He took off almost

immediately, almost crashing into another camaro that was going at nearly the same speed. She heard him swear loudly as he passed by it, taking off towards what she could only assume would be some lonely girl's house. She watched as the dark purple camaro pulled up, instantly recognizing both the driver and the passenger.

"Jesus fuck! You almost killed us!" Dustin exclaimed as he got out of the car.

"Hey! It's not my fault that asshole was driving so fast!" Chelsea defended as she slammed her door shut.

"You were driving fast too!"

"Hey guys," Max interrupted with an amused grin. The two looked over at her, momentarily distracted from their argument. Chelsea smiled as she recognized the red hair.

"Hey Max!" she greeted as she embraced her. Max smiled, the affectionate gesture more than welcome.

"Hey," Dustin greeted with a nod. "Let's go inside. I bet the guys are waiting."

"Dustin! Wait up," his cousin called out before he reached the arcade entrance. He motioned for Max to go inside as he walked back towards her. She held out her hand, dropping two dollars worth of quarters into his palm. "Have fun."

"Thanks Chels," he smiled, exposing his teeth in a cheesy grin. She nodded as she watched him run inside with more money to spend and some added excitement in his step.

"Chelsea, you're looking great."

"Hey Steve," she greeted as she leaned against the trunk of her car, basking in the sun. The warmth on her skin reminded her of home and for the first time since setting foot in Hawkins she found herself missing it greatly.

"You ready for school tomorrow?" he asked as he joined her. Her

eyes remained closed as her head tilted upwards, the sun illuminating her tan skin. Even her hair seemed to have bits of the sun woven into it with strands of gold catching the light.

“Ugh, don’t remind me. Looks like I’ll be having lunch alone.”

“Nah, you’ve got me,” Steve’s voice was nonchalant as he reminded her of his offer to accompany her during her first days of school. Being new was always scary and she was Dustin’s cousin which meant she was definitely going to be around. Besides, he liked her. She was funny in an effortless way.

“Hmm, mighty King Steve to my rescue. How charming,” she hummed. Even those stories hadn’t escaped her, especially when Dustin idolized him so much.

“I’ll see you around, Chelsea,” he chuckled as he walked towards his car.

“See you around.”

The sound of blaring music and screeching tires filled her ears. Immediately she knew it had to be that asshole of a driver that had almost crashed into her. She could practically hear the obnoxiousness in his music choice alone.

“Don’t look, Chels. You know you’ll just get mad,” she muttered to herself as she stretched, her eyes still tightly closed as she continued to soak in the sun.

Billy couldn’t help but stare at the brunette as she stretched, revealing a tan midriff as her shirt rode up. He looked her up and down, noting her toned legs and the way her hair seemed to bounce down perfectly. She looked drastically different than the girls in Hawkins with their horrendously teased hair and colorful jackets. She seemed toned down, and somehow that brought out a beauty that he only every associated with the oceans from where he had once called home.

It took him a moment to realize that this was the same girl who he had nearly crashed into on his way out of the parking lot. Her car

was similar to his except for its color. He pulled up close enough to take a peek at her license plate, surprise filling him as he saw that it was from California.

The door of the arcade swung open and out came Max looking happy. He scoffed at the expression before his eyebrows furrowed. He watched as Max made a quick beeline for the pretty brunette, embracing her in a giant hug before jogging up to his car. He made eye contact with the tanned beauty as Max climbed into the passenger seat.

“Who’s that?” he asked gruffly, taking a long drag from his cigarette.

“Dustin’s cousin. She’s nice,” Max replied simply.

Billy nodded, his eyes still locked with the brunette’s. She raised an eyebrow at his blatant stare as if daring him to say something. A smug grin broke onto his face as he sent her a wink that caused her to roll her eyes.

“Since when is she here?” Billy questioned as he pulled out of the driveway at an alarming speed. Max buckled her seat belt out of habit as they headed home.

“It’s been a week. She starts school tomorrow.”

Billy nodded, a clear end to the conversation before turning the volume up of his car stereo and speeding all the way home.

2. Begin at the Beginning

“You don’t have to drive me every morning. I can just take my bike,” Dustin reminded as Chelsea pulled into the school parking lot. Already she was on edge, her sweaty palms slipping off of the steering wheel at almost every turn.

“I know. This was more for me if I’m being honest,” she grabbed her bag from the backseat and sighed. “I don’t know why I’m so nervous. It’s just a bunch of high school kids.”

“You’ll do great. You’re a total badass” he reassured, his hand patting her shoulder lightly. She smiled, appreciating just how sweet the young boy was.

“Thanks Dustin.”

The two stumbled out of her car, fixing their shirts and carrying their backpacks. Chelsea patted down her black corduroy skirt and straightened out the tight Metallica t-shirt she wore. She could feel the stares from her classmates, her car drawing as much attention as Billy’s had before. She shook away the stares on her back, turning towards Dustin for one last reassurance.

“How do I look?”

“Totally tubular,” he declared with a giant grin. She laughed, rolling her eyes at his exaggerated surfer accent.

“Now I *know* Max and I have told you that no one says that.”

High school in Hawkins wasn’t that bad. No one really bothered her as she sat through her classes and she was glad to be left alone. She was already halfway done with her day and nothing remotely horrible had happened. Lunch time had approached quickly however and within a few seconds of reaching her locker she found that she had company.

“Ready to eat?” Steve asked brightly as he looked down at her.

“I’m not really hungry.”

“Ah, doesn’t matter. Come on.”

The school cafeteria was just like any other. Groups of kids hung out together, distinctions among them obvious in their choice of attire. Steve made a beeline for the lunchline, grabbing a few pieces of fruit and a packaged sandwich.

“Come on,” he motioned as he walked out towards the front of the school. She followed, unsure of where he was headed.

“You don’t eat inside?”

“Nah, too loud,” he stopped at his car and jumped on the hood before motioning for her to do the same. “Apple?”

“Thanks.” She took the shiny red fruit from his hands. “Where are your friends?”

“Somewhere doing something dumb I bet,” he speculated with a shrug. “I used to spend my lunches with my girlfriend but she’s not my girlfriend anymore so…”

“Shit, that sucks. I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. She found someone she likes more. Can’t really blame her.”

“Steve Harrington, I refuse to let you do that to yourself,” Chelsea said in exasperation. “You’re a great guy. I may only know you for what? A week? But I can tell.”

Steve smiled, unsure of how to take the compliment and feeling elated at the same time.

“Thanks Chels, you’re pretty great too.”

“I know.”

Steve laughed loudly, earning the attention of the group of boys and girls who surrounded a car nearby. Chelsea instantly recognized one of them.

“Hey Steve. Mullet boy over there, he’s Max’s brother?”

“Step-brother,” he confirmed with a nod. “He’s a total douche. Used to be worse though before…”

“Before what?”

“Nothing,” he shook the thought away. “He can’t stop staring at you though. Just be careful.”

“Why? Afraid I’ll fall in love with the Hawkins bad boy?”

“You’re too smart for that,” he waved the idea away. “But he’s… persistent when he finds something he likes.”

Chelsea stared at Steve as he ate, wondering what exactly had happened between the two to cause such disdain to seep into his voice.

“Thanks for what you do for Dustin,” she changed the subject preferring to land on happier topics. “I know he needed the guidance so thanks for being there for him.”

“Are you kidding? Dustin is great. Like the little brother I never had,” he said. “He’s lucky he’s got you too. You should have heard the kid when he found out you were coming. Wouldn’t shut up about how cool you were.”

Chelsea laughed at the thought of Dustin oversharing about her. She knew how he was when he was excited and was surprised his friends weren’t tired of her already after hearing him ramble on end about his “cousin from California.”

“Yeah, just wish it was under better circumstances.”

A silence passed between them. Steve reached out and placed a comforting hand on her thigh, hoping he wasn’t overstepping.

“I’m sorry about your mom,” he said softly. Chelsea nodded, her face unreadable as her own hand squeezed his.

“It’s life, you know? It happens.”

Steve nodded. He didn't want to pry and it was obvious she had tried to make peace with it. It was best left alone for now.

"Yeah."

"You're Jonathan Byers," she stated as she slid into one of the empty seats available. The boy looked up at her, surprised at both someone joining him and knowing his name. "I've met your brother."

"Will?" he asked, his attentions now on the girl besides him. He'd caught sight of her in the hallways and had wondered who she was. It wasn't every day that Hawkins got a new face.

"Yeah. He's friends with my cousin Dustin. He's a pretty cool kid," she smiled. He nodded, returning her smile with a small grin of his own. "I'm Chelsea."

"Nice to meet you," he replied softly. He looked around as he felt the stares of his classmates. "Are you sure you want to sit here?"

"Yes, why wouldn't I?" Her head tilted in confusion at his question. He was incredibly soft spoken, with a voice that seemed eternally calm.

"Most people consider it social suicide to hang out with the school freak," he answered honestly. He'd always been looked at differently and after everything he'd been through even he had to agree with how weird he was. She merely shook her head, her soft hair becoming slightly tangled with the movement.

"You're lucky I'm not most people then."

He nodded, happy to find someone who seemed to be decent enough to befriend.

"So you chose photography as your elective?"

"Yup. I love taking pictures. It's an underrated art in my opinion. I used to carry my camera around everywhere in California."

"California. Must have some nice pictures."

“Oh, Yeah. Of the ocean, mountains, beach piers, local parks. There’s so much to photograph out there.”

“There’s not much here in Hawkins,” Jonathan sighed. Chelsea smiled brightly as she pulled a Polaroid camera from her backpack, snapping a quick photograph of an unsuspecting Jonathan.

“I think there’s more than enough.”

Billy Hargrove couldn’t believe his luck when he walked into class that afternoon. It was science, a subject that came naturally to him and also his last class before the dreaded school day ended. He had sauntered in expecting to simply sit down and wait for the hour to pass but it seemed as if life had thrown a little gift at him.

“Well, well,” he was smug as he took his seat next to her, “if it isn’t the new girl.”

“Hmm, if it isn’t the local douchebag,” she replied almost instantly. She didn’t miss a beat as she chuckled, noting the way his eyebrows shot up in surprise at her response. “I was wondering when I’d meet you, Billy Hargrove.”

“We’re on a first and last name basis? Now sweetie, you’re gonna have to share yours if you know mine,” he replied with a coy smile.

“It’s Chelsea Steely,” she shared with a smirk. “I think you’d better remember it for the next time you nearly crash into my car. Your insurance will probably want it.”

“*You* nearly crashed into *me.*”

“You were the one speeding out of a parking lot.”

“So we’re both devils on the road. Something we have in common,” he winked, his devilish smile growing larger. “That’s one wicked tan you have. Not one you get from hanging around here.”

“I’m from California. But I’m sure Max already told you that.”

She wasn’t wrong to assume the younger girl had shared information

about her but only because Billy had pried for it. It wasn't every day that Hawkins had new meat.

"You're feisty," he commented, his voice low as he leaned in closer. She could smell his cologne, it's warm spicy tones hitting her nose as he closed the distance between them. "I like that."

"I think you're dreaming, Hargrove." The smirk on her face was enough to throw him off his usual charm. She turned her attention to the front of the class just as their teacher walked in. "I'm not the girl for you."

3. Muchness

“Hey Max,” Billy called out as his step-sister passed by in the hall. She stopped mid-step, turning back to look at him. “Come here.”

She was surprised at his invitation to come inside his room as it was usually off limits. She walked in cautiously, wondering what he could possibly want from her.

“Sit,” he ordered as he gestured to the empty corner of his bed. She did as she was told, confused as to what this was about. “Tell me about Chelsea.”

“Chelsea? Dustin’s cousin?” she asked in surprise. He nodded as he took a drag from his cigarette. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything. Everything. She doesn’t seem to respond to me,” Billy replied with a frown. Max laughed at the thought of Billy trying to flirt with her, quickly quieting down at the look he gave her.

“Sorry,” she apologized. “Um, she’s cool. Like *really* cool. She gives us money for the arcade when we need it.”

“All of you?” he questioned. “How? She rich?”

Max shrugged, her red hair falling across her shoulder.

“Don’t know. But she’s really nice and I can talk to her about anything. She gives the best hugs too.”

“Max, something I can use.”

“I don’t know. She doesn’t seem to like the whole player thing, if that’s what you’re doing,” Max added as she gave it some thought. “She’s a crazy driver like you.”

Billy scoffed at the comment.

“I’m gonna let that one slide,” he said with a wave of his cigarette. “What else?”

“She’s from California like us but that’s common knowledge by now. She doesn’t talk about her family or why she moved here and Dustin won’t say either. I think she’s just lonely. She needs friends.” Max paused for a moment, surprised that Billy was listening to intently. “Have you tried being just her friend?”

“Are you trying to give me advice?” Billy asked incredulously. “You’re thirteen.”

“Thirteen and closer to the girl of your dreams than you’ll ever be,” she cringed at the tone of her voice, immediately moving away as she expected Billy’s hand to strike her. After a moment she opened her eyes, surprise filling her as Billy simply stared ahead, lost in thought.

“Alright. Thanks,” he said with a nod. “You can go now.”

Max nodded and stood, briefly stopping at his door to give one last piece of advice.

“Just…be you. Not the whole tough guy act. Show her who you really are.”

“Hey guys. I brought some pizzas!”

The Party cheered as Chelsea appeared in the Wheeler’s basement with two boxes in her hands. They quickly took them from her, earning an amused laugh as they dug in.

“Chelsea, you’re the best,” Lucas declared with a mouthful of pizza. She grinned, happy to provide something for the kids.

“Can’t let my favorite bunch go hungry,” she beamed as she took a seat on the floor besides them. She stared at the board game they surrounded. “What are we playing?”

“Dungeons and Dragons,” Dustin replied. Chelsea stared at the game in confusion. “Don’t worry, it took Max a while to get it too.”

“Hey! It’s not my fault this game has so many rules,” she scoffed.

“It’s ok. It’s not for everyone,” Mike added as he handed a slice of

pizza to Jane. Chelsea couldn't help but smile at the way the two held hands even while trying to eat. Her own arm wrapped around Max as the young girl leaned into her.

"So Max, your brother…he's something."

"Tell me about it," she sighed as she chewed on her food. "He keeps asking me about you though."

"Whoa whoa, wait. Billy is asking about *my* cousin? No. No way. That's not happening," Dustin said with a defiant shake of his head.

"Yeah, he asked if you were dating Steve because you guys hang out so much," Max continued, ignoring Dustin's protests.

"Steve?" Chelsea laughed at the idea. "No way. We're friends."

"And besides isn't he in love with Nancy?" Lucas interjected.

"Not anymore!" Dustin quickly replied.

"Nancy's with Jonathan now," Mike added, remembering the way he'd see his sister curled up with him.

"Yeah, Mike is right," Will agreed. He'd asked when Jonathan began to bring Nancy over to the house and his brother had been honest, revealing that he had feelings for the girl.

"Wait. So Steve was dating Nancy and then Nancy left him for Jonathan?" Chelsea tried to make sense of what they were all telling her. Steve had mentioned an ex girlfriend but had failed to mention a name. "Poor bastard."

"Steve is ok now. He's over her," Dustin insisted although he wasn't sure if that was entirely true.

"Doubt it," Jane commented softly. She'd seen the way Steve's eyes filled with hurt the last time he saw Nancy and Jonathan together. Within seconds the room was a commotion with the kids arguing whether or not Steve was in fact over his ex girlfriend.

"Ok, ok," Chelsea said loudly in an effort to calm them down.

“Enough talking about other people’s love life.”

The group quieted down and ate silently. They were just kids but she found that they were highly opinionated in just about everything and that included the lives of their older friends.

“Billy also says you ignore him when he tries to flirt with you,” Max finally said as she looked up at Chelsea.

“Billy is right,” she chuckled, placing a small kiss on the top of Max’s head.

“Since when do you and Billy talk?” Dustin asked, surprised that the two step siblings would share anything that wasn’t angry yelling. Max shrugged, unwilling to really share.

“He’s different now. Better.”

“What? No offense Max but Billy is kind of a douche. What was he before?” Chelsea asked incredulously.

“Bigger douche,” the kids replied in unison. Her eyes widened in surprise at the consensus.

“Alright then,” she laughed.

“How’s my beautiful ray of California sunshine?”

Billy’s devilish grin was wide as Chelsea slid into the seat beside him. She chuckled, shaking her head at his greeting. It’d been months now and the pair had fallen into a pattern. Billy would flirt, Chelsea would respond with something clever and then halfway through the class time they would simply speak normally, exchanging simple talk like how their weekend went or whatever new song they were into. While Chelsea enjoyed the simple conversation, Billy’s flirtations never once wavered.

“Are you going to flirt with me every day?” she asked with a cock of her head. He grinned as he looked her up and down, loving the way she never shied away from him.

“You love it,” Billy replied with a confident grin.

“You’re imagining things,” she laughed, “Don’t you have someone else to go charm? Tina? Susie? Any other girl who would give you the time of day?”

“Why would I want to do that when you’re here looking a doll?”

“Billy, it’s been months. You’re never gonna give up?”

“I’m not a quitter.”

“My simple friendship isn’t enough for you?”

He smiled, his teeth tugging on his bottom lip as he met her eyes. He loved her friendship but that didn’t stop him from longing for more.

“Not for me.”

Billy walked her out that day, following Chelsea to her car which his was conveniently parked next to. She raised an eyebrow at the coincidence, simply waving before climbing into the driver’s seat.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she groaned as her car refused to start, the engine sputtering but refusing to turn on. Besides her she could see Billy watching from inside his own car, his grin wide as she struggled. She hit the steering wheel in frustration, cursing loudly at her rotten luck. A knock on her window drew her away from her anger.

“Having trouble?” Billy asked as she opened her door. She growled beneath her breath, annoyed that her car had the nerve to mess up on her.

“Yes,” she looked at him, contemplating her choices. “I guess I’ll just be walking home.”

Billie chuckled as she turned on her heel, already feet away by the time he called out to her.

“I can just give you a ride, you know,” he offered. She stopped,

realizing just how far she'd have to walk. Dustin was at Mike's today so he would have been long gone by now, his bike making the trip so much easier. "Come on, princess. Don't be stubborn."

Billy watched triumphantly as she marched back towards him, a defeated look on her face.

"No flirting with me," she said as she threw his passenger seat open.

"Oh, hit me right in the heart why don't you," he joked as he climbed into the driver's seat. "I'm joking. No flirting. I promise."

The car ride home was a calm one, with them exchanging thoughts on the current school dramas. They were laughable, really. Teenagers had way too much time on their hands and the sort of pranks they would pull would be a amateur at best. Billy told her of his friend's pregnancy scare and she shared the string of gossip she'd heard in the girl's locker room. The two felt like like real friends and Billy knew he was in trouble when he felt a pang of sadness as they neared her home.

"So are you going to the party tomorrow night?" Billy asked as he pulled into her driveway. The entire school was looking forward to it with people already planning on when and how to get alcohol.

"Probably. Not much else to do around here," she grabbed her things, climbing out and closing the door behind her. She leaned over, smiling brightly at him. "See you there?"

"Absolutely."

4. Six Impossible Things

“What in the hell is *that*?”

Chelsea placed the case of beers in Steve’s trunk, her hand immediately reaching for what had caught her attention. Steve cringed as he watched her pull out his bat, the bat. The one with nails sticking out and still covered in demogorgon blood.

“Should I be concerned?” Chelsea asked as she examined the weapon. What had once been simple sporting equipment had obviously been upgraded into something much more menacing. “Is this real blood?”

“Give me that,” Steve quickly pried it from her hands, throwing it back into the trunk and shutting it. Chelsea raised an eyebrow at his reaction.

“Did you kill someone?” she asked in all seriousness. He rolled his eyes, slightly concerned at how calmly she reacted at the sight of a bloody bat.

“No, I didn’t kill anyone,” he replied as he pushed her towards the passenger seat, urging her to get in. “I killed something. An animal that was attacking here a few months back.”

“An animal?” Chelsea pried, unconvinced at the way he was desperate to dodge her questions.

“Yes, an animal. Let’s drop it, ok?” Steve begged as he placed his hands on her shoulders. Her lips pressed together in a tight line. “Come on, Chels. You beauty. The apple of my eye because you know I love the hell out of you. Let’s go get drunk and dance? Won’t you dance with me?”

“Fine,” she finally replied, a broad smile on her lips as his hands stroked her cheek. “I’ll dance with you.”

“Great!” he exclaimed, letting her go and running to the driver’s side. “We could use a distraction.”

Billy Hargrove was the king of parties. They were his scene- he'd show up, cause a commotion around the keg and then later find himself in an empty bedroom with a pretty pair of legs beneath him. This was the norm for him. Drink, party, have sex. Repeat.

It had been a dry couple of months in terms of festivities and this would be the first in a while. He was looking forward to it, lord knew he needed the distraction more than anyone else. But his thoughts were occupied on one person as he stepped out of his car, being "keg king" the last thing on his mind tonight.

The scowl on his face was immediate the moment he caught sight of her. Chelsea was already there, something he knew would happen as he purposely showed up as late as possible. The party was in full swing with drunk teenagers dancing and laughing, the music blaring loud enough to drown out your own thoughts. He watched as his favorite little brunette danced around with a drink in her hands, her smile directed at someone who Billy wasn't exactly a fan of.

Of course she was with Steve. The pair had become inseparable over the past few months. Although Billy had her to himself in class, Steve had her everywhere else. While Billy didn't have the privilege of seeing her after school, it was simply a given with Steve. And it bothered him.

Chelsea smiled when she caught sight of Billy in the corner, brooding over the party with a beer in his hands. She quickly said something to Steve which he nodded to before she danced her way over to him, exaggerating her moves as she got closer. Billy fought the smile that threatened to spread onto his face as her dancing got more ridiculous with every step.

"There we go!" she exclaimed as she finally landed in front of him. "No point of coming to a party with that look on your face."

"Chelsea, always a pleasure," Billy greeted with a nod of his head. He surveyed the room, noticing how Steve had simply moved on to dance with another friend. "Leave your boyfriend behind?"

The roll of her eyes was enough to let him know she was over that particular joke. She reached behind him, grabbing a single beer and

turning to face the crowd.

“You know I don’t have a boyfriend,” she replied as she took a sip. “And quite frankly, I’m not sure anyone here is worthy of me.”

“I’m so sorry Hawkins’ best isn’t enough for you, my queen,” Billy joked as he mockingly bowed, earning a hard slap to his shoulder from her.

“Shut up,” she laughed. “I never knew this was Hawkins’s best,” she gestured to the ongoing party scene.

“I was only talking about me,” he replied with a wide grin.

She smiled brightly, her amusement at his joke undoubtedly magnified by the amount of alcohol in her system. Billy dared to throw an arm around her, positioning her in front of him as his arms wrapped around her from behind. His head lowered, resting on her shoulder as he breathed on her neck.

“Let’s go somewhere else,” he murmured, desperately wanting to leave the suffocating scene surrounding them. She hummed, leaning back into his body and surprising him.

“I *am* bored of this,” she replied as her head turned, her lips mere inches from his own. “But you take me somewhere good or you take me nowhere at all, got it?”

Billy’s smug smirk caught the attention of nearly everyone in the room as they watched the two interact. The entire school population knew Billy pined after Chelsea but could never have her, and the way he led her out the door was sure to spark rumors the next day.

“This...is nice,” Chelsea commented as she sat on the hood of Billy’s camaro. She could see the small town out in the distance, just a few lights and flickers. The sound of the people was nonexistent as they enjoyed the nature that surrounded them. The wind that rustled the leaves of the trees sent a chill down her spine, something that Billy noticed. Without hesitance he shrugged his leather jacket off and draped it on her shoulders, earning a small thank you as she

continued to take it all in.

“It’s my favorite place here,” he shared, taking a long drag from his cigarette. He exhaled slowly, the smoke barely visible now that he had turned the headlights of his car off. “It’s nice to get away from all of the noise.”

“You’re just full of surprises,” Chelsea said softly as she tugged his jacket closer. It was warm and comforting, something she suddenly felt she needed. She found that sitting here with Billy made her homesick. She missed the hikes with the warm California sun on her back. She missed the sound of the waves and the smell of salt in the water. Everything that has once brought her comfort was so out of reach now.

“Do you miss California?” she asked, turning to look at him as a gust of wind blew by. He raised an eyebrow at the question, wondering why her eyes looked so sad when moments before she had seemed so full of life.

“Yeah. This place kind of sucks compared to it, don’t you think?” he replied with a shrug. She turned her gaze back to the landscape in front of her, the moonlight illuminating her sharp features.

“It’s not that bad.” Her reply was soft, as if she had come to the conclusion after much thought. Billy tossed his cigarette to the floor and turned to look at her, unsure of what to make of her demeanor.

“Why’d you move?” he finally asked. He’d asked Max and gotten no real answer as even the girl didn’t know. Chelsea seemed to avoid the conversation with anyone who tried by expertly diverting to another subject.

“My mom died,” she replied simply. It was the first time she voiced it out loud since the funeral. Billy felt a pang in his chest as he recognized the distance in her voice.

“Chels, I’m so so-“

“My father didn’t want to be responsible for me without her,” she continued. “So he sold our house, gave me a shitload of money

because you know, guilt. And then shipped me off to the only family I had left."

"Shit, I'm sorry," Billy apologized, feeling guilty for asking.The thought of something that awful being the reason for her move had never occurred to him. She was always so happy that he never thought she could be grieving.

"It's fine, Billy." She laughed, shaking her head at the whole situation. "Who wants a shitty father anyways? I'd rather be here with people who care about me."

Billy nodded. I'm California he'd had friends, friends who he thought cared about him. But none of them ever called or even wrote and he'd been left slightly bitter about it. In Hawkins his friends were just people to surround himself with, people he knew held no real substance to his life. But the girl sitting next to him was different.

"I care about you," he spoke looking directly ahead, afraid of what her reaction would be. "You might only see me as a kid in class but I think you're pretty great."

The silence that followed had him cursing inside, calling himself stupid for admitting anything like that out loud. Of course she wouldn't see him as anything more than a classmate even after all these months. He had been stupid to think otherwise.

"I care about you too," the words were followed by an embrace to his sides and he looked down to see she had moved closer and wrapped herself around his torso. "Us fucked up California kids gotta stick together."

Billy chuckled as his own arm brought her closer, rubbing her arm in a surprisingly sweet gesture. Now he understood Max's need to give the girl hugs whenever she left. They were nice, kind of like a sense of home.

"What do you miss most about California? Shitty parents aside," Billy questioned in genuine interest.

"The beach." she replied honestly. "I miss sitting on the pier in one of

those old metal benches that have been oxidized over the years and watching the water hit the shore."

"That all?"

"I miss the sound of the waves. And the cotton candy from the small vendors."

Billy pictured it. Chelsea in a simple tank top and shorts, enjoying a pink ball of sugar as she watched the waves. Her legs would probably be outstretched, taking advantage of the sun as it kissed her skin. It certainly seemed like the place she belonged.

"I'll tell you what," Billy started as he sat up, his hand pushing back her hair as she looked up at him. "One day we'll get out of Hawkins and I'll take you back to the beach."

"Really?" she asked with a raised eyebrow. A small smile tugged on her lips. "Are you a man of your word?"

"You've just gotta trust me."

"I can't believe we're doing this now," Chelsea said as she held the hood of her car up. Billy looked up at her with a raised eyebrow, his hands busy disconnecting the jumper cables from his car to hers.

"Did you want to leave your car here all weekend?" he asked as he finished. She sighed knowing he was right.

"I just never thought I'd be at the school parking lot when I was supposed to be at a party."

"You said you were bored at the party."

"I was. That's why I said take me somewhere, which you did. But then you took me here."

"Someone's gotta be responsible, princess. I can't be picking you up for school while your car sits here."

"Ok. I see your point," she paused, her gaze on him as he walked to

his car. “You know, I think I like you like this. Nice. Not the douchebag of the school.”

Billy thought back to Max’s advice. She had been right after all.

“Don’t get used to it,” he replied with a wolfish grin. “My reputation precedes me.”